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ABSTRACT

Noting that observing preschool children at play allows teachers to understand how individual children develop their social skills, this article describes different levels of social play and shows how teachers may use a running record and check list to assess such play. Children are described as engaging in onlooker play, solitary play, parallel play, and associative play. The article notes that different toys and play centers encourage different levels of social play and how children move in and out of these levels as they play. Included in the article are selected detailed examples of running records for six children, check lists for eight children, and a drawing of a preschool room layout for 4-year-olds. (Author/KB)

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# Levels of Social Play: Observing and Recording Preschoolers

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Abstract

This article describes different levels of social play and shows how the teacher may use the running record and the check list, two observational tools, to assess preschoolers at play. Children are described engaging in onlooker play, solitary play, parallel play and associative play. Different toys and play centers encourage different levels and children move in and out of these levels as they play. Included are selected detailed examples of running records of 6 children and a checklist for 8 children. Teachers of young children will find the tools and knowledge of the levels of social maturity valuable for instruction and child growth.

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## INTRODUCTION

Children learn many things as they play. When they use blocks, they may compare size, shape and space, one-to-one relationships, counting and they may work out other mathematical concepts. In science, they discover how to use a ramp for speed and how to use a lever. They may use the blocks to create patterns in art and buildings in architecture and for music, they may use the blocks as rhythm instruments. In talking and listening to each other, they practice language arts skills. But in addition to, and as important as, these learnings in the many curriculum areas, play is a means and opportunity for children to learn and sharpen their social skills. And thus, watching the children at play is also an opportunity for the teacher of preschool children to understand how the individual child develops his or her social skills (Craig-Unkefer, Lesley & Kaiser, 2002).

Such information about the child can also be gathered by speaking with parents, psychologists, speech therapists and other adults who work with the child (Schoen & Bullard, 2002), But in the actual play situation, children can be seen settling arguments, negotiating, trying to influence others and having conversations with peers. The teacher, through careful and preplanned observation and data collection, gains valuable information

and can then make plans and prepare strategies to help each child grow in social maturity. This paper recounts such observational experiences with preschoolers and provides examples of the use of two data collection tools as well as examples of the observed children engaging in different levels of social play.

When observing children at play, we can see that they engage in different levels of interaction with others. A child may be an onlooker in the play situation; at this level he watches other children play and is aware of what they do, but does not enter into the play situation. At another level, he may engage in solitary play: he does play but by himself and without interacting with the other children. A third level that may be observed is parallel play where several children play in close proximity, using the same materials or toys but do not play with each other (Van Hoorn, Nourot, Scales & Alward, 2002). There is also the more mature level of associative play where children share materials and talk to each other but do not coordinate their play objectives or interests. The level of cooperative play, similar to associative play but including agreed upon rules, is not particularly relevant to the observation of preschoolers as it requires a degree of maturity usually not found among such youngsters.

The opportunity to observe and record the behavior of young children took place at a preschool in Queens, New York. The observational sessions occurred several times a week for fourteen weeks and each session lasted from thirty minutes to two hours. The time chosen coincided with when the children had free play in the interest centers and free play at the outside playground because at these times, children can choose their own activities. Each child can then show his or her own preferred level of play. The interest centers of the classroom included math, art, dramatic play, blocks, music, reading center and a sand table. Adaptations of two data collection tools were used: the running record and checklist (Nicolson & Shipstead, 2002). The running record is an objective and detailed account of the child during play activities and includes the child's attitude, if and what they communicate with other children and may describe movement from one level to another level of social play. This gives the teacher an idea of the social maturity of the child (Cohen, Stern & Balaban, 1997). The checklist provides another opportunity for the understanding of each child's behavior. The observer charts and records every 10 minutes how the children play and what they play

with, as well as the different levels of social play as they use different kinds of materials.

These two tools provide information on the interaction between children and how they communicate with each other. What follows are the running records of six children and examples of four different levels of play: onlooker, solitary, parallel and associative. Immediately following the running records are the checklists of 8 children at play. The included records and checklists were selected from a three day period in November 2002 and were chosen for their interest and illustrative quality.

## OBSERVATION—RUNNING RECORDS

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### ONLOOKER

At this level, the child watches other children play and is aware of what they do, but does not enter into the play situation.

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11/25 10:20-10:30 **Jason**

Michael and Mark play with the deluxe pattern blocks in the math center. Michael has a hexagon tray and Mark has a triangle tray. They play

with their own deluxe pattern blocks. Sometimes they talk, but sometimes they just play silently. Jason passes by and stops in the math center. He holds his head in his hand at the table and watches Michael play with the deluxe pattern blocks. While Michael is talking with Mark, Jason puts a green triangle in the hexagon tray. He then looks away. Michael sees the difference in the hexagon tray. He yells, "Jason! Don't touch my toy." Jason doesn't say anything. His face does not change. While Michael is talking with Mark, Jason puts a red parallelogram in the hexagon tray. Michael discovers it again and is very angry and cries to Jason, "Don't touch it! Ok! " He then plays with his deluxe pattern blocks. Presently, Michael talks with Mark again. Jason is again very fast and quietly puts a blue diamond in the hexagon. This time Michael isn't angry; on the contrary he is very happy and says, "Yes! This is what I want." Afterward, Michael isn't angry when Jason puts blocks in the hexagon tray and Jason plays near Michael. Even though they play with the same deluxe pattern blocks, they don't talk to each other. Michael still talks with Mark. When they finish, Jason very quickly takes away the deluxe pattern blocks and plays again by himself.

11/27 1:40-1:45 **Conner**

Conner sits on the chair in the dramatic play center. He laughs again and again because Jane and another boy are playing in the dramatic play center. Jane and the boy play, using many different voice sounds. Sometimes they imitate a cat's meow; sometimes they sound like a train. Conner doesn't play with them; he watches them play and is like an audience as he sits down on a chair. When the boy puts clothes on his head, Connor laughs. As the boy pretends the clothes are a whip and whips the wall, Connor giggles. The boy pretends the clothes are a heavy box and Connor smiles.

---

From the running record for Jason, one can see that Jason watched Michael and Mark played with the deluxe pattern blocks. He didn't talk with them, he just watched until he could get the blocks. He wanted to play with the deluxe pattern blocks but he waited until Michael finished. When he got the deluxe pattern blocks, he moved to another level of social play (solitary play.) The other running record shows that Conner was an onlooker of a different style. He seemed to be an audience and enjoyed watching a funny show.

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## SOLITARY PLAY

**Children play alone without overt interaction**

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11/27 1:20-1:25 **Matthew**

Matthew plays with musical instruments in the music center. He plays with the sound blocks three times and makes different sounds. He then puts away the sound blocks and plays the glockenspiel. He plays it a few times and then puts it away. He gets the drum and beats it several times. He puts away the drum and picks up the triangle and taps it many times. Afterward, he gets the tambourine and shakes it. Then he goes to the sand table and plays there.

11/27 1:25-1:30 **Joyce**

Joyce draws a picture in the art center. She colors with a green marker at the bottom of the paper. She then draws a blue cloud at the top of the paper. A pink flower comes next and she draws a quarter of the sun at the top left. Following this, she draws two red flowers. She looks around at the other children when laughter comes from the dramatic center. She

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returns to and continues to color her picture. This time she puts a purple flower and one butterfly on her paper.

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Solitary play indicates that children play alone, without interaction with their peers. We see that Matthew and Joyce did not talk with anyone. Matthew seemed to explore the musical instrument sounds. He tried many musical instruments. Joyce drew a picture in the art center. She didn't talk with anyone even though she heard someone laugh loudly. She just looked at him for a few seconds and then drew her picture.

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## PARALLEL PLAY

**Children play using the same materials or toys but don't play with each other**

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11/26 10:10-10:15 **Matthew & Conner**

Matthew and Conner build train tracks in the block center. They don't talk to each other. They use the same set but they just build back to back. Conner passes a train to Matthew and he then works alone again. Even





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though they combine the train tracks, they play with the trains separately. Conner plays with the train and pretends to make the sound of the train," Boo Boo! Don Don Don!" Matthew also plays with the train on the train tracks. He holds the train with his hand and pretends it runs on the train tracks.

11/27 1:30-1:35 **Jason**

Jason plays with the wood blocks in the block center. Another boy plays with the wood blocks also. Each of them builds a farm: a big rectangle frame outside and some small square frames inside the rectangle frame. When the boy gets a union block, Jason gets a union block also. When the boy put a half square on the right side of the rectangle frame, Jason follows this. They build almost the same shape on the floor. They then put some animals in their farms and play by themselves. They do not talk and do not communicate with one another.

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The children were playing parallel to each other, sometimes using each others toys, but always maintaining their independence. Matthew and Conner used the same train tracks set. They built on their own side, but

they didn't play together. Even though Conner passed a small train to Matthew, they played with the trains on their own side.

Jason imitated someone, but although he did not talk or interact with the other boy, he knew he was there. This he showed when he imitated the other child.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

## ASSOCIATIVE PLAY

**Children share materials and talk to each other but do not coordinate play objectives or interests**

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11/25 11:10-11:20 **Madeline & Jane & Joyce**

Joyce, Madeline and Jane dig the ground at the playground. Each squats down and holds a stick to dig the ground. They don't say anything. They just dig and dig. About three minutes pass and Jane calls out in a surprised voice, "Look! I found a dinosaur egg." She gives the dinosaur egg to Joyce. She then digs again. After a few second, she shouts again, "Joyce I found another one." She also gives it to Joyce. Soon Madeline calls out in a surprised voice, "Look! I found something special. It is a yellow egg." "Oh! My G-d!" Joyce says with a happy voice. "Let's put it



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together on the grass" Joyce continues. Then, they dig again without speaking. After a minute, Michael and Mark join the digging game. Then other children join them. There are eight children playing the digging game, but they don't talk to each other. They each dig the ground separately.

11/27 2:00-2:05 **Jason & Matthew**

Jason still plays with his farm-like shapes in the block center. Matthew comes into the block center. He builds a small farm shape and puts some animals in his farm. Matthew lets the animals lie down on the blocks as if they are asleep. He then holds a cow as if it was walking and walks to Jason's farm. "Moo Moo," Matthew roars. "Moo Moo," Jason roars. Jason holds a sheep and walks toward Matthew. They fight. "Boo Boo Boo" both of them boom out. They then hold their animals and walk back to their farm. Both of them put the animal down on the block as if they were sleeping. Jason says, "Sheep, you are tired. You have to go to bed. Good night." He then holds a cow and plays with it.

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Associative play is defined as children sharing materials and talking to each other, but not coordinating play objectives or interests. It is a form of group play (Van Hoorn et al, 2003). Joyce, Madeline and Jane dug the ground. They didn't talk to each other. However, when Jane told Joyce

that she found a dinosaur egg, they acted as if they were exploring fossils. They seemed to have an unspoken understanding of the game. Matthew and Jason played and built the farm alone. When Jason held a cow near Jason's farm, they pretended that the two animals fought together.

## ***Play Behavior Checklist***

Type of Play Behavior Exhibited
O = On looker. A = Associative
S = Solitary C = Cooperative
P = Parallel

| | 11/25 10:00-10:10 | | | | | Type of Toy (interest center in the classroom) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Children's name | O | S | P | A | C | |
| Madeline | | X | | | | Draws a picture in the art center |
| Matthew | | X | | | | Draws a picture in the art center |
| Michael | | | | X | | Plays with blocks in the block center |
| Joyce | | X | | | | Draws in the art center |
| Jane | | | | X | | Plays in the dramatic center |
| Conner | | X | | | | Plays with a train in the block center |
| Jason | | X | | | | Plays with color sorters in the math center |
| Mark | | | | X | | Plays with blocks in the block center |

| | 11/25 10:10-10:20 | | | | | Type of Toy (interest center in the classroom) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Children's name** | O | S | P | A | C | |
| Madeline | | X | | | | Draws a picture in the art center |
| Matthew | | X | | | | Draws a picture in the art center |
| Michael | | X | | | | Plays with blocks in the block center |
| Joyce | | X | | | | Draws in the art center |
| Jane | | | | X | | Plays in the dramatic center |
| Conner | | X | | | | Plays with a train in the block center |



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| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Jason | | X | | | | Plays with color sorters in the math center |
| Mark | | | | X | | Plays with blocks in the block center |
| | | | | | | |
| | 11/25 10:20-10:30 | | | | | Type of Toy (interest center in the classroom) |
| Children's name | O | S | P | A | C | |
| Madeline | | X | | | | Plays in the dramatic center |
| Matthew | | X | | | | Draws a picture in the art center |
| Michael | | X | | | | Plays with the deluxe pattern block in the math center (talks with Mark) |
| Joyce | | X | | | | Draws in the art center |
| Jane | | | | X | | Plays in the dramatic center |
| Conner | | X | | | | Plays with blocks in the block center |
| Jason | X | | | | | Looks at Michael playing the deluxe pattern block in the math center |
| Mark | | X | | | | Plays with the deluxe pattern block in the math center (talks with Michael) |
| | | | | | | |
| | 11/25 10:50:11:00 | | | | | Type of Toy (at play ground) |
| Children's name | O | S | P | A | C | |
| Madeline | | X | | | | Digs the ground with a small stick |
| Matthew | | X | | | | Rides a tricycle |
| Michael | | | | X | | Chases Mark |
| Joyce | | X | | | | Digs the ground with a small stick |
| Jane | | X | | | | Digs the ground with a small stick |
| Conner | | X | | | | Rides a tricycle |
| Jason | | X | | | | Plays on the jungle gym |
| Mark | | | | X | | Chases Michael |
| | | | | | | |
| | 11/25 11:00-11:10 | | | | | Type of Toy (at play ground) |
| Children's name | O | S | P | A | C | |
| Madeline | | | | X | | Digs the ground with a small stick but talks with Joyce and Jane. They pretend to find a dinosaur's eggs |
| Matthew | | X | | | | Rides a tricycle |
| Michael | | | | X | | Chases Mark |
| Joyce | | | | X | | Digs the ground with a small stick but talks with Jane and Madeline. They pretend to find a |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | dinosaur's eggs |
| Jane | | | | X | | Digs ground with a small stick but talks with Joyce and Madeline. They pretend to find dinosaur's eggs |
| Conner | | X | | | | Rides a tricycle |
| Jason | | X | | | | Plays on the jungle gym |
| Mark | | | | X | | Chases Michael |
| | | | | | | |
| | 11/26 10:20- 10:30 | | | | | Type of Toy(interest center in the classroom) |
| Children's name | O | S | P | A | C | |
| Madeline | | X | | | | Draws a picture in the art center |
| Matthew | | | X | | | Builds train tracks in the block center |
| Michael | X | | | | | Watches Mark play Lego in the block center |
| Joyce | | X | | | | Draws in the art center |
| Jane | | | | X | | Plays in the dramatic center |
| Conner | | | X | | | Builds train tracks in the block center |
| Jason | | X | | | | Plays with blocks in the block center |
| Mark | | X | | | | Plays with Lego in the block center |
| | | | | | | |
| | 11/26 10:40-10:50 | | | | | Type of Toy (at play ground) |
| Children's name | O | S | P | A | C | |
| Madeline | | X | | | | Helps staff decorate for Thanksgiving party |
| Matthew | | X | | | | Helps staff decorate for Thanksgiving party |
| Michael | | | | X | | Chases Mark |
| Joyce | | X | | | | Helps staff decorate for Thanksgiving party |
| Jane | | X | | | | Digs in the playground |
| Conner | | X | | | | Rides a tricycle |
| Jason | | X | | | | Rides a tricycle |
| Mark | | | | X | | Chases Michael |
| | | | | | | |
| | 11/26 10:50-11:00 | | | | | Type of Toy (at play ground) |
| Children's name | O | S | P | A | C | |
| Madeline | | X | | | | Helps staff decorate for the Thanksgiving party |
| Matthew | | X | | | | Rides a tricycle |
| Michael | | | | X | | Plays on the jungle gym with Mark |
| Joyce | | X | | | | Helps staff decorate for the Thanksgiving party |
| Jane | | X | | | | Digs in the playground |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Conner | | X | | | | Rides a tricycle |
| Jason | | X | | | | Rides a tricycle |
| Mark | | | | X | | Plays on the jungle gym with Michael |
| | | | | | | |
| | 11/27 1:10-1:20 | | | | | Type of Toy(interest center in the classroom) |
| **Children's name** | O | S | P | A | C | |
| Madeline | | X | | | | Draws a picture in the art center |
| Matthew | | X | | | | Plays musical instruments in the music center |
| Michael | | | | X | | Plays dinosaurs in the block center with Mark |
| Joyce | | X | | | | Draws in the art center |
| Jane | | | | X | | Plays in the dramatic center |
| Conner | | X | | | | Sits and plays on the floor |
| Jason | X | | | | | Looks at someone build with blocks |
| Mark | | | | X | | Plays dinosaur in the block center with Michael |
| | | | | | | |
| | 11/27 1:20-1:30 | | | | | Type of Toy (interest center in the classroom) |
| **Children's name** | O | S | P | A | C | |
| Madeline | | X | | | | Draws a picture in the art center |
| Matthew | | X | | | | Plays musical instruments in the music center |
| Michael | | | | X | | Plays dinosaurs in the block center with Mark |
| Joyce | | X | | | | Draws in the art center |
| Jane | | | | X | | Plays in the dramatic center |
| Conner | | X | | | | Plays musical instruments in the music center |
| Jason | X | | | | | Looks at someone build with blocks |
| Mark | | | | X | | Plays dinosaur in the block center with Michael |
| | | | | | | |
| | 11/27 1:30-1:40 | | | | | Type of Toy (interest center in the classroom) |
| **Children's name** | O | S | P | A | C | |
| Madeline | | X | | | | Draws a picture in the art center |
| Matthew | | X | | | | Plays on the sand table |
| Michael | | | | X | | Plays dinosaurs in the block center with Mark |
| Joyce | | X | | | | Draws in the art center |
| Jane | | | | X | | Plays in the dramatic center |
| Conner | | X | | | | Sits and plays on the floor |
| Jason | | | X | | | Builds with blocks in the block center (farm) |
| Mark | | | | X | | Plays dinosaur in the block center with Michael |

| | 11/27 1:40-1:50 | | | | | Type of Toy(interest center in the classroom) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Children's name** | O | S | P | A | C | |
| Madeline | | X | | | | Draws a picture in the art center |
| Matthew | | X | | | | Builds with blocks in the block center (farm) |
| Michael | | | | X | | Builds with cardboard blocks in the block center with Mark |
| Joyce | | X | | | | Draws in the art center |
| Jane | | | | X | | Plays in the dramatic center |
| Conner | X | | | | | Looks at someone play in the dramatic center |
| Jason | X | | | | | Looks at someone build with blocks |
| Mark | | | | X | | Builds with cardboard blocks in the block center with Michael |
| | | | | | | |
| | 11/27 1:50-2:00 | | | | | Type of Toy(interest center in the classroom) |
| **Children's name** | O | S | P | A | C | |
| Madeline | | X | | | | Draws a picture in the art center, and talk with someone |
| Matthew | | X | | | | Builds blocks and puts cows and sheep in the block center (farm) |
| Michael | | | | X | | Builds with cardboard blocks in the block center with Mark |
| Joyce | X | | | | | Stops drawing in the art center. Looks at someone play in the dramatic center |
| Jane | | | | X | | Plays in the dramatic center |
| Conner | X | | | | | Plays musical instruments in the music center |
| Jason | X | | | | | Finishes the farm and play by himself |
| Mark | | | | X | | Builds cardboard blocks in the block center with Michael |
| | | | | | | |
| | 11/27 2:00-2:10 | | | | | Type of Toy (interest center in the classroom) |
| **Children's name** | O | S | P | A | C | |
| Madeline | | X | | | | Draws a picture in the art center. |
| Matthew | | | | X | | Finishes the farm. Sometimes plays alone and sometimes plays with Jason |
| Michael | | | | X | | Builds cardboard blocks in the block center with |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | Mark |
| Joyce | | X | | | | Draws in the art center. |
| Jane | | | | X | | Plays in the dramatic center |
| Conner | | X | | | | Walks around the classroom, and talks to himself |
| Jason | X | | | | | Finishes the farm. Sometime plays alone and sometimes plays with Matthew. |
| Mark | | | | X | | Builds cardboard blocks in the block center with Michael |

From the play behavior checklist, we also can see that sometimes children engaged in different levels of social play and sometimes these levels changed with different types of toys and materials. When someone drew a picture in the art center, he or she usually played alone (solitary play); when children played in the dramatic play center, they usually played with other children (associative play). Play in the block center could be either solitary play or associative and levels of play at the playground varied.

## SUMMARY

From these observations, we learn that children's play can be categorized into different levels of social behavior: onlooker, solitary, parallel and associative. Also, we see that as they used different kinds of materials, they engaged in different level of social play (Ivory, 1999). When Jason watched Michael play with the deluxe pattern blocks, he

wanted to play with them also. As he was at the onlooker level, he waited his turn. The children also learned from their play. When Matthew played with the musical instruments, he was not only having fun, but also learning different sounds. Jason copied someone's farm, and thus he also learned how to build a farm.

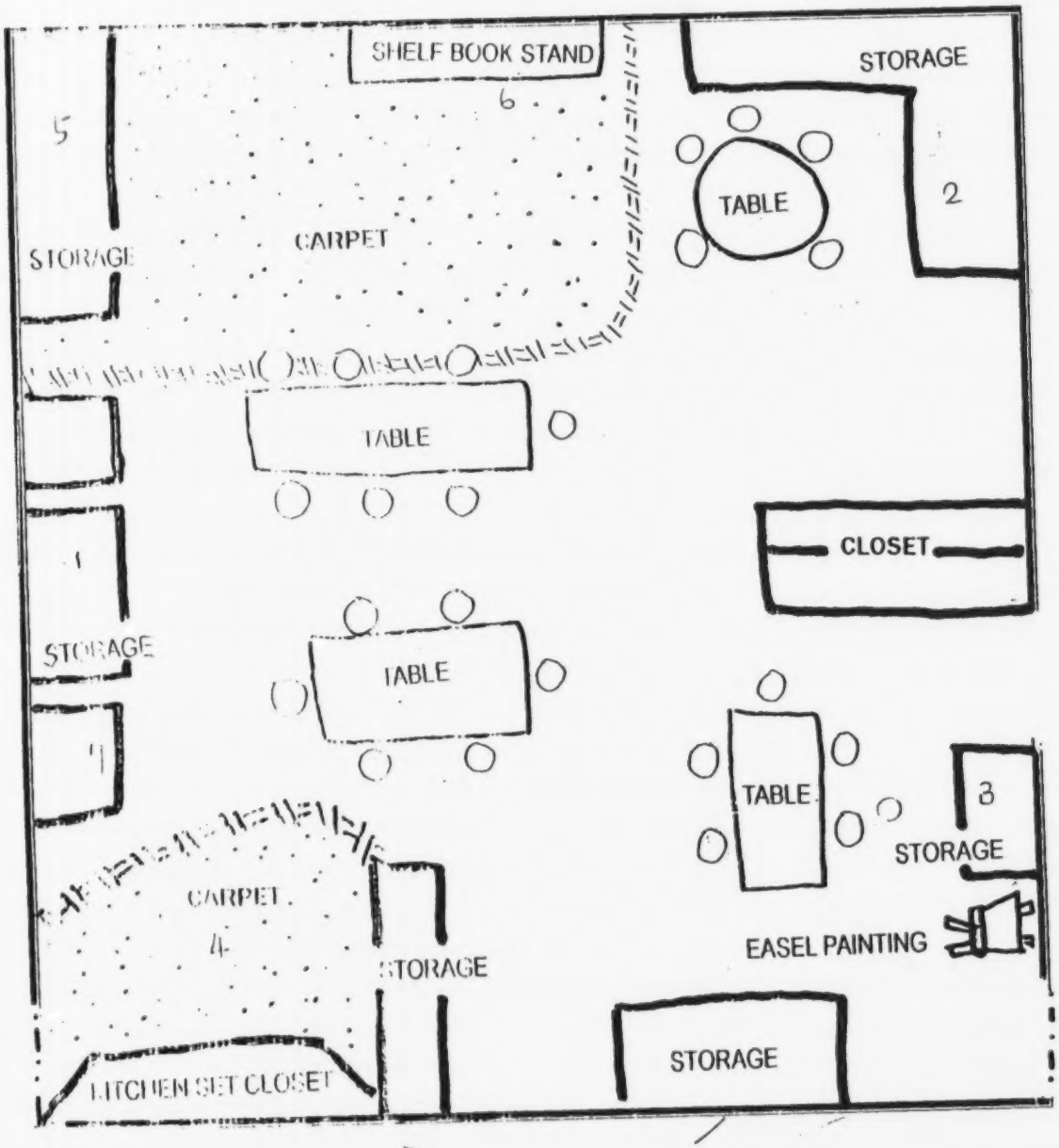
All the levels of play have value for the child: solitary play performs several functions depending on the age of the child and what he is doing. It might be the opportunity for dramatic play where the toys become family members or it might be a good time just to relax in a quiet setting. Particular types of toys encourage the level of interactive play of young children. Teachers of preschool children can learn much about their pupils from objectively observing and recording their play. This is time and energy well spent and gives the professional a more rounded picture of the child and an opportunity to plan for individual growth.

**Layout of Interest Centers in the Classroom**

1. Math center— pattern blocks, bowls and small shapes of bears of assorted colors, a primary scale, bingo, pegboard and pegs, magnetic board.
2. Manipulative center— board puzzles, board games, checkers.
3. Art center— easel, markers, paper, drawing templates.
4. Dramatic play center— dolls, kitchen set, play food set, clothes, hand bags, cooking set, kitchen utensils, telephone.
5. Block center— wooden blocks, Lego, plastic animal set, dinosaur set, train set,
6. Reading & Music center—books, CD/cassette player, Glockenspiel, hand bells, tambourine, finger cymbals, triangle, tambour drum, maracas, sound blocks.
7. Sand table— sand tools, funnels, scoop.

- Playground— tricycle, jungle gym. (not shown on diagram)

## ROOM LAYOUT 4 YEAR OLD LEVEL

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